

Writing the High Fantasy Film

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Abstract: As the fantasy genre reaches ever greater heights in Hollywood, the *high* fantasy film continues to struggle. This research explores one of the most challenging subgenres in film, and puts forward fairy tales as one possible means of revitalizing it. I begin by exploring what constitutes a fantasy film as well as the recent history of fantasy in Hollywood. Then, I consider the merit of the high fantasy film as both escapism and as a means of dealing with social trauma. Finally, I consider how fairy tales—with their timeless and wide appeal—may assist filmmakers in writing more effective high fantasy films. By analyzing a selection of high fantasy films on the basis of how well they fit fairy-tale paradigms, I expect to find that the films which fall more in line with fairy-tale conventions also achieved greater success, whether that is critically, commercially, or in lasting cultural impact. Finally, I propose utilizing the results of the research to write my own original high fantasy film.

Narrative

Introduction:

Currently, it can be said that Hollywood is an empire of fantasy. Year-to-year the most successful films—whether that be a superhero movie or a new Pixar film—are those that weave fantastical elements into their narratives (*Box Office Mojo*). Yet despite the recent success fantasy has found in Hollywood, there is a certain type of fantasy film that continues to struggle: the *high* fantasy film. While high fantasy has found success in animation and television, in the realm of live-action film these stories have become incredibly rare. Time and time again they have failed both critically and commercially. To revive the high fantasy film, this research proposes taking a page from some of the most famous fantasy stories ever told: fairy tales. I will seek to answer this question: Can we utilize fairy tale structure to write more effective high fantasy films? By analyzing a selection of live-action high fantasy films using fairy-tale paradigms, I hope to create a model that filmmakers could use to revitalize this difficult subgenre. Ultimately, I will apply the research by writing a high fantasy film of my own.

Background:

Many critics have struggled with the use of the term “fantasy” as a genre signifier. As Katherine Fowkes outlines in her book *The Fantasy Film*, fantasy involves “a break between what the audience agrees is ‘reality’ and the fantastic phenomena that define the narrative world” (Fowkes). In contrast with science fiction, these fantastic phenomena are not explained as extensions of scientific principles. Fowkes definition is suitable, but problems arise because of the sheer scope of its application. If simply incorporating fantastical elements makes a film a *fantasy* film, then surely most films in general fall under that category. This research, then,

focuses on what can be considered a subgenre of fantasy: *high* fantasy. High fantasy traditionally refers to fantasy stories that take place in a secondary, or separate world (Sullivan III). The “high” signifies a particularly substantial break from reality, and an abundance of fantastical phenomena. In the context of this research, this distinction serves to exclude films which may incorporate fantastical elements but primarily take place in close variations of the real world.

Despite the overall success of fantasy films in recent years, the live-action high fantasy film has grown scarce. So, how did we get here? The current state of fantasy in Hollywood can largely be traced back to 2001. As *New York Times* Critic A.O. Scott outlined the following year, four monumental fantasy films had been released in close succession: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, *Star Wars Episode III: Attack of the Clones*, and *Spider-Man* (Scott). Among them, *Lord of the Rings* is the best example of high fantasy—the original novel by J.R.R. Tolkien generally regarded as an archetypal work of high fantasy (Sullivan). Each of these films were massively successful, spawning sequels, action figures, and high box-office totals. Yet in the years that followed, no new high fantasy film could live up to *The Lord of the Rings*. Big-budget high fantasy films failed repeatedly, so much so that by 2011 one critic would call fantasy “the least loved genre” (Gustini). Eminent screenwriter Scott Cargill, writer of *Doctor Strange*, describes his difficulty selling high fantasy scripts on the popular media site *Reddit*: “One need only glance at the box office totals for *Eragon*, *The Seeker: the Dark is Rising*, *The Golden Compass*, *Dungeon Siege*, *Season of the Witch*, and *Black Death*, and you’ll see the evidence that Hollywood execs use to kill any projects that come up” (Massawym). While superhero films and the *Star Wars* universe have continued to plant themselves firmly in popular culture, high fantasy films have struggled.

To breathe new life into the subgenre, some reform will be necessary.

The question may arise, then, of *why* a revival of the live-action high fantasy film would be valuable. After all, they are difficult to make and the market has effectively deemed them undesirable. Outside of simply adding more diversity to our entertainment, there are many positive effects worth mentioning. In his book *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*, Francis Pheasant-Kelly posits that one likely factor in the success of the fantasy film in 2001 was the escapism these films offer (Pheasant-Kelly). In the wake of an immense national trauma, the fantasy film—and especially high fantasy—provided much needed relief. As senior professorial lecturer Charles Cox states: “The real world is morally murky and troublingly complex, so the black-and-white worlds of traditional fantasy can be a calming antidote to that” (Cox). Many critics and filmmakers also believe there is value in how high fantasy can *reflect* our society. In a 2007 article for *the Los Angeles Times*, writer-director Guillermo Del Toro argues that “social traumas often find their most potent outlet in the world of fantasy” (Adams). Through allegory, high fantasy helps us to face cultural anxieties. When placed in another world, we may gain new perspectives on traumas and issues facing our reality.

Methods:

While there are undoubtedly many factors that have played into past failures of the high fantasy subgenre, this research will focus primarily on the writing. In the first stage of my research, I will analyze a varied selection of high fantasy films on how well they fit fairy-tale paradigms. There are a few reasons behind this. Where so many high fantasy films have struggled to stand out (Perno), fairy tales have created timeless fantasy worlds that transgress the boundaries of language, age, and culture. Additionally, many scholars have argued that fairy

tales have both therapeutic and cognitive effects. In his now famous book *The Uses of Enchantment*, child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim analyzes fairy tales from a Freudian perspective. Though some of his analysis is now a bit outdated, his core message remains strong: fairy tales give shape to children's formless anxieties, helping them face and overcome them (Bettelheim). On a cognitive level, other fairy-tale scholars and researchers have argued that the "magical thinking" has positive developmental effects on children, such as fostering creativity (Tatar, Subbotsky). If these various merits of fairy-tales were more present in high fantasy films, then surely they would resonate more widely.

In analyzing the selection of high fantasy films, I will utilize folklorist Vladimir Propp's *Thirty-One Functions* and *Dramatis Personae* (Propp). These functions and personae (characters) are representative of the most common story elements and characters found in fairy tales. I will also consider folklorist Stith Thompon's index of common fairy-tale motifs. My analysis of these high fantasy films will use these tools to explore how closely each captures the essence of fairy tales. In the selection of films, a few restrictions will be upheld. All of the films analyzed will be live-action (as in, not animated), and direct adaptations of fairy tales will be excluded. The analysis on each film's fairy-tale qualities will then be compared with both its critical and commercial success. Critical success can be measured through rating aggregate sites such as *Rotten Tomatoes*, and commercial success can be drawn from box-office returns.

Ultimately, this analysis would be compiled into an article accessible to the general public.

While much has been written on what makes an effective high fantasy book (Sullivan III), there is little on what makes an effective high fantasy film. *The Lord of The Rings* films have sparked endless critical discussion; the more abundant *failed* high fantasy films have been given little

attention.

After collecting and compiling this data, I will attempt to put it to practical use. The second stage of my research would involve writing a high fantasy film script. So as to be able to incorporate any valuable insights gained from the data, the entirety of the film would be conceived of in the time following the first stage of the research. As a timeline, I expect it would take approximately two to three weeks to complete the first stage of research. This would include watching and analyzing the selection of high fantasy films and working on the article deliverable. The writing stage of the research would be divided into a few phases, involving outline, treatment, and completed script. At the very least, the goal will be to have a completed and thorough treatment (fully-fleshed out characters and story) by the end of the summer.

Expected Results and Conclusion:

Presumably, the high fantasy films which more widely integrate fairy tale elements have found greater, lasting success. By conducting this research, I hope to glean valuable insight into how we may write more effective high fantasy films. Sharing this research would then assist other filmmakers in revitalizing the subgenre. While it could be argued that this would result in more formulaic films, it is a necessary step if high fantasy films are to reach a level where innovation occurs more freely. Prioritizing time-proven stories with wider demographic appeal—like those of fairy tales—may help the subgenre claim a good standing. In the process of writing a high fantasy film of my own, I anticipate I will learn more about the difficulties prior high fantasy films have faced in their writing, and how I can best present my research for practical use.

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Timeline

- May 17th, 2020
 - Begin Stage 1 of the research: viewing the selection of high fantasy films, and analyzing them through fairy-tale paradigms.
- May 31st, 2020
 - Complete viewing of all of the selected high fantasy films, with notes and analysis begun on each.
 - Begin organizing analysis into an article deliverable.
- June 7th, 2020
 - Finish Stage 1 of research: complete article deliverable compiling analysis on each film showcasing their resemblance to fairy tales and any correlations with success.
 - Begin brainstorming and outlining high fantasy film script.
- June 14th, 2020
 - Complete outline for high fantasy film script.
 - Begin script treatment.
- June 25th, 2020
 - Complete script treatment.
 - Begin writing the full script.
- August 1st, 2020
 - Aim to have a completed first draft of the high fantasy script.

- Begin revisions, peer feedback.
- August 21st, 2020
 - Complete second draft of script.
 - Begin revising article deliverable to make it more suitable for practical application, taking into account new first-hand experience.
- August 27th, 2020
 - Complete revised article deliverable.

Budget

<u>Description of Expense</u>	<u>Cost</u>
Fees to purchase each film for analysis (assuming ~7 films)	~\$100
License for industry standard screenwriting software (Final Draft Pro)	\$200
Screenwriting Books <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy</i> by Orson Scott Card • <i>The Screenwriter's Fairy Tale</i> by Scott Clock • <i>How to Write a Movie in 21 Days</i> by Viki King • <i>The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales</i> by Jack Zipes 	~\$150
IF on campus: LMU housing expenses for start of Summer Session 1 until Fall Transition.	\$3588
TOTAL	~\$4038